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## LITERATURE

*Agnosticism.* By ROBERT FLINT, D. D., LL. D., F. R. S. E., Professor in the University of Edinburgh. New York, Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1903. pp. xviii, 664. Price, \$2.00.

"The present volume," Professor Flint tells us, "is part of what was many years ago announced as meant to form when completed a System of Natural Theology which would deal with four great problems." The first problem, that of evidence for belief in the existence of God, was dealt with in his *Theism*; the second, the refutation of antitheistic theories, was partly—as regards atheism, materialism, positivism, secularism, pessimism, and pantheism—taken up in his *Anti-theistic Theories*, and is, as regards agnosticism, taken up in the present volume. The two remaining problems, the delineation of the character of God, as disclosed by nature, mind and history, and the tracing of the rise and development of the idea of God, have been treated only so far as they come under discussion in the article *Theism*, in the 9th. edn. of the *Britannica*.

The present work, then, is not an historical, colorless estimate of the part played by Agnosticism in modern thought; it is a partisan work, destined to refute the agnostic. Let us see how it opens.

Professor Flint begins by giving Hutton's and Huxley's accounts of the coinage of the term. According to Hutton, Huxley suggested the word *before* the formation of the Metaphysical Society, taking it from St. Paul's mention of the altar "to the unknown God." According to Huxley, it was coined *after* the formation of the Metaphysical Society, "as suggestively antagonistic to the 'gnostic' of Church History." Now one of these accounts must be false if the other is true. Professor Flint remarks that both "well deserve to be borne in mind," and appears to think that both alike represent the facts. Possibly they do; possibly the term is of mixed associative origin. Nevertheless, the reader is not reassured by finding that the author, in his haste to enter upon detailed destructive criticism, allows the discrepancy of the two statements entirely to escape his notice.

Professor Flint next revives the etymological argument. "It was contrary to Greek usage to terminate with *ikos* a word which commenced with *alpha privativum*." The fact is, that it was contrary to classical Greek usage to terminate with *ikos* a word so beginning, in which the negative meaning was retained. If the negative meaning dropped out, and the word became positive, the formation was allowable: witness the adjective *aoristikos*. In so far, then, as agnosticism represents a positive and not merely a negative tendency (as it surely must, if it takes 664 pages for its refutation), the most classical of ancient Greeks would have had no objection to the word. But, Greek philology apart, what does the argument matter? If the genius of the English language allows and has for a long time past allowed such formations, why need the modern Englishman trouble about the ancient Greek? If Professor Flint will consult the *A* in any historical English dictionary, he may perhaps be induced to withdraw this part of his indictment.

We are next told that Huxley had better have called himself a 'sceptic,'—'sceptic' being a good old philosophical word that meant

the same thing as 'agnostic.' True, "it must be admitted that it has acquired an offensive connotation." But is a man bound to call himself by a name that has acquired an offensive connotation? Granted that 'agnostic' has acquired just the same connotation—a statement, however, that does not accord with the later statement that "the man who calls himself an agnostic implicitly claims to be no common man, but a philosopher"—granted this: may not a man coin a word to get a breathing-space for himself and his opinions in the push and hustle of orthodoxy?

"The criticism in which I have thus far indulged may seem to some of my readers rather hypercritical." Let us hope so, if we hope for any fairmindedness in the reading public. But stranger things are to come. We find Professor Flint deciding, with his eyes open, that he cannot meet agnosticism on its own or indeed on any common ground. "It is in vain for a non-agnostic [a pretty term, if we are considering terms!] to seek to find a definition of agnosticism which will satisfy an agnostic. Any definition of agnosticism which will satisfy an agnostic must of necessity fail to satisfy a non-agnostic." We are taught in science that the definition of a standpoint or movement or attitude should come after the standpoint or movement or attitude has been thoroughly canvassed, in its historical bearings; the definition should be inductive and impartial, and may obtain whether we accept or reject the mode of thought defined. Not so, it would appear, in a System of Natural Theology! First of all, you have the right to define a movement at the outset to suit your own ideas of it. Secondly, it is true, you have the duty of not "judging any system merely by the definition" that you give. But—either your definition prejudices you, and so you *do* do things "unfair and unreasonable:" or your definition must be modified by your treatment of the systems, and then it has needlessly prejudiced your agnostic readers. It is hardly necessary to say that the 'duty,' beautiful as it looks in theory, does not affect Professor Flint's practice. He starts out with a definition which no agnostic would accept, and, at the end, finds that definition triumphantly vindicated by his discussion of the systems.

Once more, and we have finished with this analysis. Professor Flint assures us that he has no animus against Huxley. "Great Britain may well be proud to have had such a son as Thomas H. Huxley. I must reject any view of his which seems to me erroneous; but the fact of a view being his can never, I feel sure, be among my motives or reasons for rejecting it." Imagine this sort of preface to a piece of scientific criticism! One who has positive arguments to adduce need not apologize for adducing them: we are all working in the interests of truth, and are grateful enough—though we may be sore for a moment—if our clay idols are broken. But when a man comes to us with the assurance that these idols, after all, were delicately moulded and had their value as works of art, we rather suspect him of the very animus which he is at pains to deny.

We have dealt only with the first 20 pages of the 664. We have, however, probably said enough to give the reader an idea of the contents of the book. It is comprehensive, scholarly, erudite—and *ex parte* from cover to cover. For those that like their history of philosophy written in this way, this is the sort of book that they will like. The rest—we hope the majority—will use the book as a work of reference, as saying the worst that can be said against a great movement of modern thought, but will hardly trust it as a guide to the course of that movement.

P. E. WINTER.